

Kimagure Orange Road- the Rebel Esper

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Summary: Madoka discovers that her intimacies with Kyousuke have had some interesting side effects, while the Kasuga Clan is beset by a villain from the past.

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Disclaimer: The characters and settings of Kimagure Orange Road do not belong to me by any stretch of the imagination- instead, they belong to Matsumoto Izumi (the author of the manga) and Toho\Studio Pierrot. The English translation is done by Animeigo. Our respect is due to the above. Any and all original characters in this fic, however, do belong to me (of course). I dunno if any respect is due to me or not... oh, well.

Author's Notes: Kill me. Please. As if I didn't have enough series I was working on at once, receiving three of the Kimagure Orange Road TV tapes I'd ordered months ago sparked an interest that could not be ignored in writing a fanfic for that series. So, I just gave up my plans to not start anything new until I finished at least one of the series I was working on, and began this thing. Soon, I think I'll start a Slayers fanfic as well (just because once I start, the floodgates will open), and may even get going on that Ranma\ADPolice fanfic that was the sequel to 'How Do I File This One.' These, in addition to Guide in the Wilderness, Tylor's Fury, Ushio and Tora: Discoveries, Patlabor: Personal Files, Three Souls One Heart, Return

of the Sisters (It ISN'T dead, just suspended- REALLY! HONEST!), my untitled Princess Mononoke fanfic, a Voltron oneshot lemon (*cough*) I promised another mailing list, Language Lessons (which again, isn't dead, just suspended- I lost one of my OWN Japanese lesson tapes, and until I find it or replace it I'm stuck. However, I have been writing a lot of the non-lesson segments for this fic, so once I get chapter 2 out, I'll be able to move on with a large number of other chapters in rapid succession), and, yes, more stuff that I haven't started yet but will one day. *sigh* Um, I think I'm going to be writing fanfics for quite some time... hopefully, I won't get any MORE ideas for fanfics in any OTHER series any time soon.... Oh, by the way, this is based entirely on the TV series (I haven't actually seen all of it, but I've seen plenty to write this fanfic with, and I've read episode summaries for what I haven't seen), the OAVs, and the first movie. I'm dumping Shin KOR, because it contradicts certain ideas I have for a major element of the fic, and besides- to the best of my knowledge it isn't professionally translated, except for the movie. Oh, well.

Chronological Notes (kept separate for those people who NEVER read author's notes): This is anime-based, and set after the TV Series, OAVs, and the first Movie. Shin KOR never happens in this universe, and is in fact incompatible with it as certain concepts of this fanfic are contradicted in that series...

On with the story... -----

Chapter 1

Madoka Ayukawa smiled to herself as she washed the dishes for the ABCB. The previous night had been incredible- even enough to make all the pain that they went through with Hikaru worth it. Perhaps. No, definitely... though it was sad that the problems with Hikaru had to happen. In the end, though, Kyousuke was too valuable of a four leaf clover for her to hand him off to Hikaru, however much she cried.

Madoka continued scrubbing the dishes and sighed. 'There you go, making yourself all melancholy again. And after such a good time last night, too.' Then again, that might have been WHY she let those happy feelings get away from her- because feeling good about last night made her feel guilty about what she'd taken away from her one-time best friend.

It was something she'd have to think about. Would she ever be able to forgive herself for hurting Hikaru? It felt so... selfish... to want Kyousuke for herself, but she'd given up so much of her life for so many other people that couldn't she be allowed to be selfish about one of the only things that was truly important to her? And besides, in the end, hadn't KYOUSUKE been the one to make the decision?

Perhaps that was the best way to think about it. Kyousuke had always seemingly preferred her, even when he closest to Hikaru. He accepted Hikaru's attentions, but craved her own. So Kyousuke was happier this way. She was happier this way- when she wasn't feeling guilty about it all. Perhaps even Hikaru would be, in the long run, happier- if Kyousuke had chosen Hikaru over Madoka, he would have started out always knowing that, at one time, there was someone who he loved more, and eventually that would have torn the two of them apart,

making Hikaru feel just as bad. Maybe. Maybe not.

As these thoughts churned through her head, she tried to grasp the last cup. It was out of reach, but as her hand went towards it the cup itself lifted and flew towards her. Madoka didn't even realize it until she held the cup in her hand. When she did, she gasped.

'How did that happen?' she thought to herself. She'd learned of Kyousuke's Esper powers some time ago, and so the actual movement wasn't what surprised her. What surprised her was that neither Kyousuke nor any of his family were present- nor was anyone else, as it was after hours and the Master was taking a day off. So how in the world did that happen?

* * * * *

A little more than an hour later, a knocking on the door of the ABCB let Madoka know that Kasuga had arrived to walk her home. She still hadn't finished the dishes- she'd gotten lost in thought about what had happened, trying to convince herself that it had just been her imagination and failing- so she had to ask him to wait.

"I'm not quite done yet... want anything while I finish up?" she asked, a little nervously.

Kasuga glanced to see what would be easily available. "I'll help myself to an iced coffee," he said, walking around the counter and grabbing a can from the refrigerator. The ABCB usually made its own iced coffee, but it had a small number of cans for orders 'to go.'

Ayukawa finished the dishes and drained the water from the sink. "Okay, done. Um... Kyousuke, can I come over to your place tonight? There are some things I want to talk with you about."

Kasuga nearly dropped his can of coffee- thankfully, it was still unopened, and so nothing spilled. "Um, uh, of course, if you want to."

Madoka smiled nervously. "Thanks- I'll go change and then we'll be on our way." As she headed over to the locker room, she paused. "By the way, is the rest of your family home?"

Kyousuke's nervousness doubled. "Um, uh, well... I think they will be, yeah. Is that going to be a problem?" he squeaked.

Madoka chuckled slightly. "Stop thinking so dirty, Kyousuke! Like I said, I just want to talk. It might be a good thing your family is there, in fact- they might be able to help." With that, she disappeared into the changing room, leaving Kasuga to wonder what she might want help with.

She emerged a few minutes later in a thin blouse and tight jeans. Kyousuke, unable to help himself, glanced her up and down, checking out how the simple outfit showed off her exquisite curves. Madoka noticed, but didn't say anything. She'd allow him to have a few dirty thoughts every now and then- as long as they were of her, and they didn't get either of them into too much trouble.

"Um, ready to go?" Kyousuke asked.

Madoka smiled and nodded. "Let's get moving." Once everything was locked up and they were out of the shop, she offered him her hand, which he took gently, and they started walking in the direction of his house.

A comfortable silence held for a couple of blocks before Ayukawa decided to open up a conversation, and perhaps get a little head start on the questions she wanted to ask him and his family. "Kyouusuke, there's something I've been wondering since I've found out about your... family secret."

Kasuga glanced around. It was nighttime, but he could tell that there wasn't anyone around close enough to hear them. "Yeah? What is it?"

"What does it feel like? To use it, I mean?"

Kyouusuke thought about how to answer that for a moment. "Well, it depends entirely on what I'm using it for, and how much energy I have at the time. If I've just eaten gotten an energy boost- usually from sleep, food, or adreneline- I just don't notice anything at all if I'm doing something simple like, say, levitating this can of coffee," he noted, finishing the can of coffee and, with his power, letting it float an inch off his hand for a few seconds before mentally tossing it into a nearby trashcan. "Heh... if I'm mad enough, or desperate enough, I can do some pretty remarkable things and not even realize I'm doing them until after I'm done. It does tire me out, though."

Madoka nodded. "Do you ever use it unintentionally? For instance, have you ever, say, been reaching for a cup of coffee and it flew to your hand without you trying to call for it?"

Kyouusuke nodded. "It can happen, especially when you're young and not used to the Power. We are taught to not misuse it, though, from a very young age, and part of that teaching is to not use it when you don't want to. Sometimes, though, even someone who's as old as I am can use the Power by accident- like when I make a timeslip." He paused. "It's not always a bad thing, though."

Ayukawa smiled, remembering her own experiences following Kyouusuke through a timeslip, and finding out that he WAS her first love, after all. That was a very happy memory- well, several of them, actually.

"So why the sudden interest, anyway?" he asked after a short silence.

Madoka frowned slightly, brought back to the present. "That's what I wanted to come over to your place to discuss. Let's wait until we get there before I answer your question, okay?"

Kasuga looked puzzled. "Uh, okay."

They continued walking in silence, but this time it was somewhat less comfortable. Kyouusuke didn't know what was going on, and Ayukawa was worried about what the cause of her own puzzlement might be. Certain fears gripped her, and she tightened her hold on Kasuga's hand. He, increasingly worried himself at her growing anxiety, tightened his

hold as well.

By the time they reached the door, they both were bordering on nervous wrecks. Madoka, however, straightened herself up, released Kasuga's hand, regained her composure, and looked over at him with determination. "Well, are you going to open the door, or not?"

Kyousuke blinked, and he scrambled to grab his keys out of his pocket and opened the door for her. He didn't know what was going on, but he could tell that when he found out, it wasn't going to be very good.

"Kyousuke! You're home earlier than we expected- oh, Madoka! Hello, welcome to our humble home," Manami said. Thankfully, there were no flying cats or pieces of furniture that needed to be avoided, and Kyousuke and Madoka were able to enter safely.

Kurumi, grooming Jingoro (much to the cat's displeasure), waved at them happily. "Hello, Kyousuke. Hello, Madoka," she said in a sing-song voice. "Now just why did you bring her over here, brother, instead of taking her to her house? I'd think you'd get a lot more privacy for the perverted things you do over there."

"Kurumi!" Kyousuke fumed.

Kurumi giggled and stuck her tongue out at her brother before returning her attention to Jingoro.

Kyousuke's father walked into the room, holding a portfolio case. "Oh, Madoka! What are you doing here?"

Madoka glanced around at the Kasuga family before beginning. "Well... I had a few questions I wanted to ask you and the whole family. Even Kyousuke's grandfather, if possible."

Mr. Kasuga coughed. "Um, I'm afraid that he's involved in a clan function at the moment, and so we can't call on him right now. But we'll gladly help if we can."

Madoka sighed. Hopefully, they would know. "I hope you can. See, something happened earlier today, and it kind of... well, maybe you might be able to help."

Manami, seeing Madoka's difficulty in discussing this, pointed at the loveseat. "Would you like to sit down?"

"Yes, thank you," she replied. Grasping Kyousuke's hand for reassurance, she lead him to the offered seat. Mr. Kasuga, Manami, and Kurumi all gathered around to hear what she had to say. "While I was working at the ABCB today, washing dishes, something rather... disturbing... happened. Well, maybe it was disturbing- I don't know. I guess it might have just been my imagination that it happened at all, but..."

"Madoka," Mr. Kasuga interrupted in a soothing voice. "What happened?"

"Well... see, no-one else was around, and I was washing the dishes getting ready to go home, but I still had an hour until Kyousuke was

supposed to show up. I wasn't really thinking about what I was doing, I was just doing it... then I reached for a glass that was really too far away for me to pick up, and it... it flew to my hand, in much the same way your Powers can make things fly around the room. I... I don't know what caused it, either- was it a poltergeist, or... or...."

Mr. Kasuga's eyes hardened. He turned to Kyousuke. "Son... you aren't a virgin any more, are you?"

Kyousuke jumped up, letting go of Madoka's hand. "Wh- what does that have to do with anything?!" he sputtered.

Madoka, on the other hand, collapsed with a haunted look in her eyes. Kyousuke's father seemed to know right away what it was, and his question apparently confirmed her suspicions. "It's true... I'm pregnant, aren't I?"

Kurumi and Manami's eyes widened in shock. "Eehhhhhh!?" they chorused.

Kyousuke, at that pronouncement, wobbled on his legs and fell to his knees in shock. "P-pregnant? But... how?"

Madoka glared at Kyousuke. "Well, I certainly hope you didn't forget last night... or the night before... or last Sunday."

Kyousuke waved his arms in a panic. "No- of course I do. They were unforgettable nights... but we were using protection, so how could you be pregnant?"

Madoka shrugged. "I don't know, but, well, I'm guessing from your father's question that my seeming to have the power is the result of you getting me pregnant- right?"

Mr. Kasuga paused. He and Kyousuke's sisters were a little shocked by the couple's frank discussion. "Um, well... not necessarily."

Kyousuke finally recovered enough to stand up. Swallowing, he asked, "What, exactly, does 'not necessarily' mean?"

"Well," Mr. Kasuga said. "It doesn't mean that she's NOT pregnant, but... what I was thinking was that Madoka absorbed some of your excess Power, Kyousuke. And the only way she could do that would be if you were engaging in, ahem, certain activities I don't believe you two should have been doing until you were married."

Madoka blushed faintly as she realized what they'd just admitted to. Kyousuke was more or less in shock, but he still had the wherewithal to question his father's words. "She absorbed some of my Power? But I don't feel like I lost any of it...."

"You didn't. Like I said, she absorbed some of your EXCESS Power. When you and she were... intimate, your power almost certainly grew greater than your body could contain on its own, and so it sought an additional host- Madoka." Mr. Kasuga coughed. "It happened between me and your mother quite a bit, actually."

All three of the Kasuga siblings was surprised by that one. "But

you've never used any of the Power!" Kurumi exclaimed.

Mr. Kasuga sighed. "I don't know if I've got any of it left, actually. I wouldn't use it if I did, either, even in an emergency. The Power I got from these... encounters... is limited. I could never tell how much of it I had, or when it would run out...." He directed his attention to their guest. "Madoka, don't worry about it affecting you badly. You have some of Kyousuke's powers, but it's like a rechargeable battery- when you're with him intimately, you'll 'charge up,' but you'll find that it's very easy to use that power up quickly."

"Mr. Kasuga," Ayukawa asked. "Why wouldn't you use your possible Powers even in an emergency?"

Kyousuke's father sighed, bowing his head. "Well... as long as I still have that small charge, I've still got a small part of her with me at all times. I won't ever let it go, not even at death- it's really all I have left of her that matters, except for the kids." Silence reigned for a moment- this time, it was neither comforting nor disturbing, but instead was just... heavy. Finally, Mr. Kasuga's head looked up, a wicked smile on his face. "At any rate... it seems obvious that the two of you are now a bit more than just friends, huh? When are you planning on getting married?"

"Um..." Madoka and Kyousuke answered.

* * * * *

The ancestral meeting hall of the Kasuga clan was in flames. Standing outside of the burning building stood a battered pair of grandparents. "Did everyone get out safely?" the Grandfather said.

"I believe so. Most people left as soon as He showed up, and the rest of them escaped when the flames appeared," his wife answered.

"Where's Kazuya?" he asked.

"His parents took him away to hide. He's powerful for his age, but he's too young and inexperienced to face someone like... Him."

"Good," the Grandfather said. "If they can stay in hiding until this is all over, all the better. But the people who weren't here should be told of these happenings. Find Akane- send her to let Kyousuke and his sisters know what's going on. Together, the four of them should be able to keep safe."

"Are you sure?" the Grandmother asked. "Most of the clan was gathered here, and yet even together we weren't able to deal with Him."

"No, I'm not sure. I thought I was sure that we could handle Him this time, but... well, you can see that I was wrong. We'll just have to hope, though, that with their youth, their intelligence, and their friends they can at least survive."

"If not-"

"If not them, then who? They are the strongest of those of us not in the village... and WE, obviously, could not handle Him. They are our best hope." He paused. "Considering what happened to us, they are our only hope."

Chapter 2

Madoka and Kyousuke were sipping tea with the rest of the local Kasuga clan, more or less recovering from their admission of guilt with regards to their love life. That, and thinking about the question that had just been asked of them- 'When are you planning on getting married.'

It wasn't really that either of them disliked the idea- it was just that neither of them had thought about it since they'd shed the major obstruction of their relationship- Hikaru. With Hikaru no longer coming between them, there was no real pressure keeping them apart... which eliminated some of the urgency behind their time together. They were finally getting comfortable as a couple- marriage was something they had plenty of time to think about.

Of course, now that Kyousuke's family knew how far their relationship had gone, much of that time had been erased. The Kasuga's were expecting an answer for when Madoka would be joining their clan, and they would probably be disappointed if one didn't arrive soon.

Not that there hadn't been pressure before, of course- ever since they found out that Kyousuke had dumped Hikaru, the entire clan- even those who lived in the same region as his Grandparents and didn't see him very often- knew that he'd devoted himself to Madoka. Gentle teasing and subtle hints came at them almost every day, but there was no REAL pressure, and the word 'marriage' was never used.

Until then.

The sudden appearance of another esper into the middle of the room interrupted their silent contemplation.

"Akane!" Kyousuke blurted out. She had appeared right over him and Madoka, and fell into their laps. As she did, he noticed she was passing out.

He also noticed she was in terrible shape. There was a splint on her arm, there was soot on her face, there were burns on her hands, there were scratches on her face, and there were tears in her clothes. In short, she looked as if she'd just come out of a war.

Madoka was a little startled to find a girl falling into her lap for no apparent reason, but once she recovered she was all business. "Kyousuke, help me get her into the bathroom. We need to clean her up and see if she's got any other injuries...."

"I thought she was at the clan meeting- what happened to her?" Manami asked as the couple carefully moved the injured girl.

"And why did she come here, especially with all of those injuries?" Takeshi mused. "It must have really drained a lot of her Power to transport here all the way from the Clan retreat. I didn't even think she was strong enough to do it...."

Kyousuke and Ayukawa didn't hear any more, closing the bathroom door behind them.

"Is the furo filled?"

Kyousuke blinked. "Madoka, you're forgetting this is just an apartment, and a small one at that. We don't HAVE a furo, just a shower."

She sighed. "Right... um, can you 'transport' the three of us to my house? I can probably take better care of her there."

"Not all three of us at once, but I can probably move us one at a time. It'll take a lot outta me, though- especially since it's the end of the day and I've already expended a lot of energy."

Madoka nodded. "Take her first. Try and get her into the bathroom itself, if you can maneuver that precisely. Then come back and get me."

Kyousuke nodded, grabbed hold of Akane, closed his eyes, and concentrated. The two of them disappeared. Ayukawa checked the medicine cabinet, grabbed some bandages, and waited. She didn't have to wait long- less than a minute later he returned, grabbed hold of her, and teleported.

They reappeared in the bathroom, where a sleeping Akane had been gently placed by Kyousuke. Madoka nodded.

"Now, get outta here for a bit... I'm gonna undress her and bathe her, and you probably shouldn't be around for that."

Kyousuke nodded, but hesitated. "Um, I will, but... there's something I never told you about her...."

"Oh?"

"Um... did you know she used to have a crush on you?"

Ayukawa stopped. It wasn't that uncommon for younger girls to develop a sort of crush on older girls, but once they reached Akane's age it was kind of rare. It could lead to some rather uncomfortable incidents if she wasn't careful... but there were more important things to worry about than that. "Um... no, I didn't. But it doesn't matter, now, does it? She needs our help."

Kyousuke sighed. Even in a crisis like this, he couldn't subdue his fears- even though Hikaru was no longer an issue, he was still scared of threats to their relationship, and having Madoka undress Akane was a bit of a threat in his mind. Still, this was an emergency- surely he could put aside his insecurities for a situation like this.

"Right. Um... I hate to ask it, but all that transporting around really drained me. Can I raid your fridge?"

Ayukawa didn't even bother looking at him, instead moving to take care of Akane. She knew from her recent investigations into how the Power affected the Kasugas (especially Kyousuke's sisters) why he was asking. "Go ahead. I'll call you when I'm done."

Grabbing a bottle of iodine and some cotton swabs out of her medicine cabinet, Madoka took Akane to the (empty) furo and set her inside. Stripping the injured girl to her underwear, Ayukawa opened the bottle and began applying it to the visible wounds, cleaning it first by running water from the tub's spigot onto each open injury.

Hesitantly, she removed the crude splint, inspecting the area it was treating. It looked like her arm might have been broken near the wrist, and there were additional wounds all along the arm. Carefully, Ayukawa disinfected and bandages the open cuts.

It was while she was doing this that Akane started to stir. Moving slightly, the wounded girl opened her eyes. "Ma... madoka?" she said faintly.

"Don't move your right arm," Ayukawa said sternly. "You broke it, and I had to remove the splint to treat some of your other injuries. If you move around too much, it might hurt you even more."

Akane nodded. "I won't. Thank you... Madoka." She unconsciously reached up with her uninjured arm and moved to cup Ayukawa's chin.

Madoka flinched away. "You're not yourself, so I'll forgive you for that, but I'd prefer it if you remembered that I was in love with your cousin, not you."

Akane winced as if stung, dropping her arm. She knew her crush on Ayukawa was a silly dream, but to have it so bluntly disrupted hurt. If she hadn't already been through hell that day, she'd have been in tears. "Sorry."

Madoka worked on in silence for a few more moments. When she was done swabbing down Akane's arm, she reached for the splint to reapply it. Finding it was out of reach, she sighed. 'Hmm... I wonder,' she thought. Closing her eyes, she reached inside of herself and accessed the limited amount of the Power that she'd absorbed from Kyousuke. Trying to remember how she'd done it in the ABCB, she tugged at the splint with her mind.

Akane's eyes widened as the two sticks and roll of bandages flew to Madoka's hand. "You... you're an esper, too?"

Madoka smiled grimly, staring at the stuff in her hand. "Not exactly," she said, carefully holding Akane's right arm in such a way as to not further damage it. "But you could say that Kyousuke gave me a little bit of himself to play with for a while."

"Huh?"

Finishing up with the splint, Ayukawa grabbed the tattered clothed that Akane had arrived in and handed them to her. "Here, put these back on until we can find some replacements for you. I probably shouldn't say more, but if you must know you can ask Kyousuke's father. But first, I think we should get you to a hospital to get a look at that arm."

"Um... I'm going to need help getting dressed."

Madoka sighed. What more was going to happen that night?

* * * * *

Kyousuke hesitated. He knew he wasn't the only person who was going to need some food- Akane must have completely drained herself teleporting all the way from his grandfather's in the state she was in. In fact, she probably needed something to recharge herself more than he did.

He couldn't make much on his own, but there were the ingredients to make some ramen available. Snacking on an apple, he started boiling some water while he assembled the needed materials to make the soup- Madoka didn't keep the instant variety in her house, but he thought he could handle making it for scratch.

When he tasted his creation upon completion, he shrugged. It wasn't great, but it was edible. Fixing himself a bowl, he sat down to eat.

A pale Akane came in, followed by Madoka. "There's some noodle soup on the stove if you want it," Kyousuke noted. "It's not very good, but it should give you some energy."

"Um, thanks," Akane said sullenly.

"Eat, and then we'll go to the hospital," Ayukawa ordered. She decided to save her questions until after Akane was treated, and hoped her glance at Kyousuke conveyed that message.

Akane just nodded, serving herself a bowl and picking up some chopsticks. Madoka, just out of curiosity, grabbed a few noodles and tasted them herself.

"Bleh... Kyousuke, remind me to do all the cooking after we're married. This stuff is WAY too bland," she said.

Kyousuke's eyes widened. That was the first time either of them had said anything about getting married to each other. "Um, sure thing," he said, trying to stay under control. Now was not the time to worry about his romantic troubles- now was the time to take care of his injured cousin.

Akane was not feeling very happy. First of all, she'd been badly injured in the attack, and then the girl she felt a significant attraction to kept pushing the fact that she was dating Kyousuke into her face. To make matters worse, the ramen she was eating was totally tasteless. It was filling, however, and she needed to eat something to regain her strength.

* * * * *

When the ramen was finished, the three people piled into one of the cars belonging to Madoka's mother and drove on out to the hospital. After checking Akane in to be x-rayed, Ayukawa and Kyousuke sat down together in the waiting room.

"You know, we still don't know what caused all of this," Kasuga said.

"What do you think could have happened to her?" Ayukawa asked.

"Plenty of things COULD have happened to her," Kyouzuke said. "Though I'm more concerned about the fact that whatever it was happened at the Clan meeting."

"'Clan meeting?' That's the second time I've heard this mentioned- what is this 'clan meeting' for, anyway?"

Kyouzuke hesitated. Glancing around to make certain that no-one could hear him, he answered, "Um... I'm not sure if I should say. It's supposed to be a secret even to those few outsiders who've been told of the Power. Dad didn't even know about it until after I was born...."

"So is there nothing I can do to convince you to tell me?" Madoka said, smiling at him in a way she knew was certain to push his buttons.

Kyouzuke sighed. "Let me guess- you won't take 'no' for an answer?"

"No, I won't."

"Then I guess I have to tell you, don't I?"

"Yes, you do."

"Okay," he surrendered. "Though I doubt you'll be interested in much of what I have to say."

Ayukawa smirked. "I rarely am, but listening to you will kill the time."

Kyouzuke feigned insult at that. "Hey!"

Ayukawa squeezed his hand. "Come on, what's the story?"

"There's not much to tell, really," he noted. "It's an annual meeting, where traditionally all the Kasuga's gather. That's no longer the case- now, except for newborns, children who have yet to reach maturity are excluded, and attendance is optional after your first appearance as an adult. I went last year, Akane went this year, and my sisters are supposed to go next year. Kazuya probably went as well, since we couldn't take him in when his parents went, though I doubt he was permitted to attend the ceremonies."

"What do you do at these gatherings? Why all the secrecy?"

"Well, a number of somewhat private clan functions happen during the meeting. Infants are blessed, most of the clan's marriages are held, the laws of the clan are passed, and similar things. Oh, yeah- and once every ten years, the violators of the clan's laws are prosecuted and punished."

Ayukawa raised an eyebrow. "You have your own laws? Your clan sounds rather vigilante." There was no real accusation in her voice, merely curiosity.

Kyousuke again glanced around to make certain they weren't being eavesdropped upon.. "Well, obviously, there are some crimes which we cannot allow... others... to know about. If we didn't police ourselves, then power-mad Kasugas would be ruling all of Japan, probably."

Madoka nodded. "I suppose your superpowers would require something like that." She paused. "This wouldn't happen to be one of those years, would it?"

Kyousuke frowned. "I suppose it might be, at that."

"Could one of these 'violators of clan law' be responsible for Akane's condition?"

"I... doubt it. The combined might of the clan should be greater than the Power controlled by any one individual. Something else must have happened."

"I guess we'll just have to ask her when she comes out."

Kyousuke sighed. "Yeah... so what do while we wait?"

"Hmm... we could try calling your grandfather up and seeing what he knows?"

Kasuga shook his head. "No... I don't know if we even can. He usually relies on the Power so much he doesn't usually bother with things like phones, televisions, ski lifts, and the like. That's why there was only one lift at his ski resort.... At any rate, I don't know what his phone number might be, if he even still has one."

Madoka frowned. "Come to think of it, shouldn't we call Akane's parents and let them know about her injuries? I've been to their house, and I know that they have a phone."

Kyousuke sighed. "They were at the clan meeting, too. Either they know about it already, or I can't get in touch with them. Either way, there's nothing we can do."

Ayukawa sighed as well. "I just feel that there's something we should be doing right now. I know that she was hurt pretty badly and that she was in an obvious hurry to get here since most of her injuries weren't properly treated. Until we know WHY, though, we can't do anything about this situation. And that frustrates me."

"Well, lets see if we can think of something to get our minds off of it, for a while," Kasuga suggested.

"Like what?"

"Hmm," he said, trying to think of something which would take Madoka's mind off of all the other problems. "How about you tell me what I did wrong with my cooking?"

Ayukawa blinked. That certainly wasn't anything she was expecting him to ask. "Well... I don't know. It was rather bland... how about you tell me how you prepared it?"

"Well, first I..."

* * * * *

"...to the water even before you add the noodles," Madoka was explaining. "That way-" She stopped herself when she noticed the doctor approaching the two of them with Akane in tow, a cast on her arm. "Akane!" she waved.

Akane yawned, walking over to them. "Thanks for waiting, you guys," she said drowsily.

"I'm afraid we had to give her some pain-killer while we set the bone in her arm," the doctor explained as he handed some forms to Kyouzuke, "So she might be a bit drowsy for a while. Besides her arm, though, she didn't have any major injuries. She needs to come back in about four to six weeks for us to check the bone's progress, but otherwise she's fine."

"Thank you, doctor," Kyouzuke said, signing in a few places to complete Akane's check-out. "We'll take her home."

The doctor nodded, taking back the forms and departing. Akane looked like she was about to fall asleep standing up, and so Kyouzuke grabbed her by the arm to support her as they made their way to the parking lot.

Ayukawa pulled her car keys out of her purse as she asked, "Where should we take her?"

Kyouzuke hesitated. "Akane, do you want to go to your home?"

She shook her head. "I'd rather be around other people right now."

He sighed. "Madoka... can you put her up for the night? There's no space at my place..."

"Not a problem- we've got plenty of space." Unlocking the car doors, she got in. Kyouzuke helped his cousin into the back seat and then sat himself on the passenger side.

"Akane," Kyouzuke asked as he buckled his belt. "What happened? Why are you so badly hurt? And why were you in such a rush to get here?"

She answered with one word. "Takauji."

His eyes widened. Madoka looked at his expression before starting the car. "Kyouzuke?"

"Just get us home, Ayukawa," he said, reverting to the more formal address he used to give her. "We'll talk about it later."

"Kyouzuke?" she asked. He didn't answer. "Kyouzuke, what's wrong? Why won't you say any-"

"Madoka," Akane said. "Trust me. He's not going to answer you until he's ready. I'm tired... let's just get out of here."

Chapter 3

Madoka drove the car on, trying to keep her mind on the road. It didn't help that she wanted to look on over at Kyouzuke and see if she could see what was wrong. With one single word, Akane succeeded in putting him into a brooding silence. Ayukawa couldn't help but wonder who or what Takauji was, and what he\she\its significance was to the Kasugas. It was obvious, however, that she wasn't going to find out until they all got home and she could confront him herself.

The frustration built the entire trip to her house. When she finally pulled into her driveway, she was about to explode at Kyouzuke, demanding to know what was going on.

Then she saw his face.

It was, quite possible, the most tormented expression she'd ever seen on him. It was worse even than any of the times they'd almost broken up. She'd almost describe it as a look of pure anger combined with a look of pure loss. It was also a look that told her he didn't want to be forced into anything, right then.

Still, she had to know. "Um... Kyouzuke, do you want to come in? I doubt anyone would mind if you decided to spend the night tonight...."

He nodded. "I have some questions for Akane, anyway." Softening slightly, he turned to look at her. "I'll tell you about it when we're inside. It's just... a bit hard to talk about."

Ayukawa released a breath she didn't know she was holding. "Thank you," she said. She got out of the car and opened the door for Akane, waking her up and helping her out while Kyouzuke went on inside the house. Madoka was a little surprised- she would have thought he'd have helped his cousin out. Then again, this Takauji thing was seriously affecting him, so perhaps it shouldn't be that much of a surprise.

Apparently, her concern showed on her face. "If you're wondering," Akane said, following Madoka towards the entrance of her house. "There's a reason he's so upset. I won't get into the details, but it involves his mother's death."

Madoka slowed down, almost coming to a halt at her own front door. His mother's death was something he never talked about, and she didn't really know how he felt about it. She fully expected him to be saddened by it, but this intense anger that was mixed along with it surprised her.

"Hey, are we going in or what?" Akane asked, yawning.

"Huh? Oh, sorry," Ayukawa said, moving on past the doorway into her home.

As the two girls passed through the living room, Kyouzuke stopped them.

"So, Akane," he said. "You feeling up to talking about what

happened?"

Akane sighed, taking a seat. "Not really, but I know you won't be happy with that answer."

Madoka hesitated before moving to sit next to Kyouzuke. She wasn't sure he'd be very receptive to her presence, but unless he said something she didn't think it would hurt.

"So, tell me... how did he do that to you, anyway?" Kyouzuke asked. "I mean, he's powerful, but surely he isn't stronger than the rest of the clan combined."

"No, he's not. But he's taught himself a technique which allowed him to take control of some of those weaker in the Power, and he can do it with multiple people. So we weren't trying to stop him alone, but him and about twenty of our cousins as well."

Kyouzuke nodded. "What level of strength was he controlling? Would Kurumi and Manami be safe?"

Akane shrugged. "He didn't try to control me, and your sisters are more powerful than I am. I suspect so."

"Good. So, why did you come straight to our apartment from the meeting? Surely you eventually overcame him."

"Er... no, we didn't. He's escaped."

Kyouzuke laughed. It wasn't his usual 'I'm laughing to try and get out of trouble laugh,' however- it was a much darker laugh. "Really?"

"Um, yeah. So grandfather thought we should scatter into smaller groups, where there are fewer people he can control. You, me, Kurumi, and Manami should be strong enough together to be 'safe.'"

Kyouzuke laughed again. "And you expect me to help put him away again? No."

"Kyouzuke, this isn't just about you little disagreement with our laws-"

"I don't care!" he shouted back. "I'll protect you guys if you need me to, but I will NOT fight him without provocation."

"No provocation?!" Akane growled in disbelief, rising to her feet. "Who do you think broke my arm? Who do you think destroyed the ancestral family hall? Isn't that enough 'provocation' for you?"

"Who is imprisoning him eternally for NO REASON? Sorry, I think WE provoked HIM, not the other way around."

Madoka stepped away from Kyouzuke, feeling something dangerous emanating from him. "Can we please calm down? Let's not fight, okay? What's going on?"

Kyouzuke turned to Ayukawa. Watching her confused and frightened face, he realized that he was scaring her. "Sorry, Madoka," he said,

calming himself down. "Maybe I should let you in on the story."

Akane nodded, breathing deeply to try and calm herself as well. "You do that. I'm going to bed... er, where is my bed?"

"Upstairs," Madoka said. "Third door on the right. That's our guest room."

"Thanks." Akane took one last look at Kyouzuke, sniffed, and stormed out of the room. Unknown to either he or Ayukawa, however, she sat down outside of the doorway and listened in.

"Seems to me she might have a reason to be upset, if you aren't even going to consider getting revenge on the guy who broke her arm," Madoka noted sternly.

"He was just trying to escape from being imprisoned for what I feel is a very unjust reason," he replied.

Madoka nodded. "I think I gathered some of that. Why don't you start from the beginning- what did he do that everyone else thinks is so bad?"

"He refused to die."

Madoka raised an eyebrow. "I'm not sure I understand that one."

"The Power gives us all a number of abilities. Some of us are able to train ourselves to use abilities others can't, or aren't allowed to- Kazuya has full telepathy, Akane has partial telepathy, and Takauji... Takauji learned how to make himself immortal. He's been around long enough to have seen Princess Kasuga as a baby... and he still looks about our age. For some stupid reason, immortality- in fact, almost all of the ways the Power can be used to heal a person or save their life, is against our laws."

Madoka nodded. That seemed awfully strange to her, as well. "Why? I mean, what is the explanation given?"

"Well, as a person ages, the amount of the Power they can control grows. It slows down the older you are, but it still grows in strength. Back in the time of Princess Kasuga, our clan made the law that immortality was forbidden knowledge, so that no-one would get TOO strong in the Power. Well, Takauji and a few others who'd succeeded in obtaining that skill refused to give it up. A civil war was fought, and most of the immortals were cornered and destroyed. Takauji, however, survived- there may be others, but if so they're very good at hiding."

"How did he survive if the others were destroyed?"

"He learned how to protect himself from our powers, how to heal not just the ravages of age but the wounds inflicted by the weapons we might use, and how to protect himself from any form of illness and disease."

"But he was eventually captured."

"Yes. He was strong, but a hundred of us together were stronger. We captured him, weakened him, and imprisoned him behind certain wards that can affect us espers. Every decade, when criminals are prosecuted, we bring him up, and ask him to remove the effects which prevent him from dying. Even if he WERE to drop those elements, though, he wouldn't be allowed to live the valley, for fear that he might try and restore those spells. I suppose that makes some sense, but it's a harsher sentence than we hand down on the worst murderers of our clan. Especially since his prison is totally devoid of anything the least bit entertaining- no books, no windows, no television, no music, nothing."

"That does sound harsh," Madoka admitted. She didn't see the connection Akane had mentioned earlier- for some reason, all of this was related to his mother. "But you seem to be taking it rather... personally."

"Well... yes," he admitted. "See, back when my mother was dying was when I first heard about him myself. I... well, I attempted to break him out, so that he'd cure my mother. I was just six at the time, but I was willing to use my Power to abandon and no-one was willing to harm someone as young as I was, so I pushed my way through the guard that had been set up and stormed to his prison. I wasn't very bright about it, though- I broke into his prison, but I didn't think to come up with a way to escape." Kyousuke sighed. "Needless to say, I was caught before I could learn anything he might have taught me to save my mother. She died a month later."

"I'm sorry, Kyousuke," Ayukawa said, trying to comfort him with her voice. Still, there was something she had to ask. "But are you sure Takauji would be, well, safe to talk to? I imagine that living in captivity as he has, without any form of entertainment or activity, might drive him a little... insane."

Kyousuke nodded. "He might be, but as long as he doesn't do anything vicious or offensive, I don't care. I don't think he'll hurt anyone if they don't attack them."

"And if he does?"

Kyousuke paused. "Then maybe I'll change my mind. But it doesn't matter- it's not like I can take the time out of my life to go hunting him down. If he comes here and proves violent, however, I'm not too worried."

"Why not? He sounds dangerous."

"He is," Akane said, leaving her hiding place outside of the door. "But so's Kyousuke."

"I thought you were going to bed?" he growled.

"I just wanted to let you calm down, first."

"Wait," Madoka said. She didn't like that Akane was listening in, but what she'd said was more important. "What do you mean, Kyousuke's dangerous?"

That kept Kyousuke from replying to his cousin- he certainly didn't want his girlfriend to think of him as being dangerous, but then

again he also didn't want to seem to brag. "Um, well... see, the thing is..." he started pushing his fingers together, not sure how to answer.

Akane sighed. "What he's trying to tell you is that, despite being one of the wimpiest and most indecisive men our family has ever bred, he's also one of the most powerful Espers in history. He's probably stronger than Grandfather, by now, and he's only just been passed by Kazuya. In fact, the only esper outside of Kazuya who's likely to be more powerful than him is Takauji himself."

Madoka looked at Kyouzuke in surprise, but remained skeptical. "Okay, so you're powerful. But don't you think it's a bit arrogant to assume you can beat him when he's so much stronger than you are?"

Kyouzuke nodded. "Sure, if I actually thought I could beat him. I don't... but I do think I can keep him from hurting you or anyone else I care about- there's a limit to what he can do without other espers he can control." He paused. "In a way, you could say that I can be just as powerful as he can, but not for as long as he can."

"Of course, if you were with me and your sisters, we could stop him between the four of us," Akane said. "Though the chances of that are slim unless you're actually TRYING to corner him with the four of us."

"Which I won't," Kyouzuke growled. "Get out of here, Akane. We'll talk about this after you've had a good night's sleep."

"You just don't want to hear the truth about what you refusing to help is going to do to us!" Akane shouted back.

"No, I just want to be able to talk to Madoka PRIVATELY, like I thought I WAS doing before you showed up. Get the hell out of here," he snarled bitterly.

Ayukawa's eyes widened. Kyouzuke was getting REALLY mad, and at his own cousin, too. She couldn't recall a time he'd been that angry, and wondered vaguely at what would happen if it came to blows between the two of them. She'd yet to see a serious fight between two Espers, but she was fairly certain it would be rather violent. She certainly didn't want to see one, now... even though she WAS a little annoyed at Akane for having listened in to her private discussion.

"Guys, calm down. Akane... just do what he says. Go to bed, we can talk more tomorrow. I have some questions I'd like to ask him in private, and anyway you HAVE been given some painkillers- you're probably not thinking straight right now. Wait until tomorrow, please?"

Akane looked into Madoka's pleading eyes and sighed. She couldn't refuse the girl, she knew. "All right... until tomorrow. But, Kyouzuke, you and I ARE having a 'talk' tomorrow."

Kyouzuke nodded. "Fine. Now, get out of here."

Ayukawa watched in concern as her boyfriend glared at his cousin until he was certain she was gone. Then, to her surprise, his angry expression completely dropped.

"Okay, she's gone to bed for real this time. Now we can talk about the more... personal... aspects of this thing."

Madoka immediately suspected something was up. "Okay, Kasuga, what's going on?" she demanded, reverting to her more formal address for him.

"Sorry about that. I knew she was listening in the first time, so I couldn't give you all the real reasons for my not wanting to go after this guy. I just gave you the ones Akane already knew," he explained.

"Obviously, you want to keep them your secret" Ayukawa noted. "So spill it, already. Why don't you want to go against this Takauji guy?"

Kyousuke sighed. "Well, I already mentioned a few of them- I really DON'T have any grudge against him, and I really think that the crime he's accused of breaking is stupid. A person should at LEAST be allowed to use those sorts of powers to keep themselves healthy for their normal life expectancy, but even that's forbidden."

"Though there are other reasons."

"Of course," Kyousuke said. "If that was all that was keeping me from helping out my family, I wouldn't let it stop me," he said. "But perhaps I'm afraid my friends and family would be hurt more if I were to actually go seeking him out."

"How?" Ayukawa asked, raising an eyebrow. "Sounds to me like you might be in more danger as things are."

"Of him attacking? He's not going to do anything... he's going too busy trying to hide from us to keep from being captured and put back in that prison again to worry about the people who aren't hunting him." He paused. "But see, my sisters already use the power more than they should, and so does Akane. If we aren't careful, we're going to give away our family secret again. If that happens, we'll be chased out of the area again, losing all of our friends and getting uprooted from the first stable home we've had in our lives."

"And you're afraid that if you go looking for him you'll reveal the Power to someone?"

Kyousuke shook his head. "Worse. In order to go locate him, we'd have to expend so much of the Power that we wouldn't just reveal the secret to the people of this area, but the news of it would go national. We'd have to either retreat to the valley the rest of our clan resides in, or we'd have to leave the country. I don't know what I'll do if he becomes threatening, but I certainly don't want to be forced to leave Japan if I can avoid it." Unsaid, he was really just worried that he'd lose her.

Madoka's eyes widened. He was afraid of being forced to leave, whether he fought Takauji or not, she could certainly understand that. She had to say something, to reassure him. "If you had to leave, I'd go with you."

Kyousuke looked at her in amazement. How did she know just what was

worrying him, and fix it all with just one sentence? "I... thank you, Madoka. You don't know how much that means to me."

Ayukawa smiled. "Maybe I do. Maybe I wouldn't have said it if it didn't mean just as much to me."

"Still," he said, "I don't want to drop everything and go hunting some guy who's never done anything against me. I just want to try and keep living a normal life, if I can... like I said, I doubt he's going to do anything major, so I'm not going to worry. I'm going to go to college, have fun, and spend as much time as I can with you." He turned to her, a determined look on his face. "I'm not going to give any of that up."

Madoka smiled slightly. "I guess I can't really argue with that." She paused, then changed the topic in an unexpected direction. "Shouldn't you let your family know that Akane's all right?"

Kyousuke blinked. "Huh? Oh, right. I guess I'd better go- ack!"

He'd started to walk out the door, but Madoka grabbed him by the back of the shirt before he could leave, choking him slightly. "And where do you think you're going?" she asked.

"Er, home, to tell everyone about Akane, like you suggested," he answered, confused.

"Did I tell you to leave? No- just to let them know. Call them up on the phone, let them know she's all right. There are still a few things I want to... discuss... with you, though."

Kyousuke didn't quite catch the tone of her voice, but he could tell that she didn't want him to go any time soon. "Um, then I'll write a note- if I use the phone, they'll have too many questions. Got a pen and paper?"

"Here," she said, handing him the notepad that was next to the phone. She watched on in curiosity as he scribbled out a message to his family. "How do you plan to get that to your home without going there?"

Kyousuke re-read his note, closed his eyes, and tossed it aside. To Ayukawa's surprise, it never hit the ground, instead fluttering away as if carried by the wind. "I'll have to use the power... it'll look like the note just got caught in a jetstream or something, though, so it's pretty safe in this case." Reopening his eyes, he looked at her. "So, what else did you want to talk about?"

"Well, I was thinking that maybe I should learn how to use that little bit of the Power that you've loaned me. Just in case you DO have to fight this guy, I can be there to back you up."

Kyousuke's eyes widened. With all the excitement about Akane and Takauji, he'd actually forgotten about the revelations from that morning. "Um... I can, but I'm not sure it would be a good idea. I mean, if he's able to take over your mind and you can't use the Power, he won't be able to use you against me in any serious way, since you wouldn't be a threat when it comes to adding to his own energy. Since you AREN'T strong in the Power, he would easily be able

to take you over, and I'd rather not have to worry about you being, well, someone to be feared."

Ayukawa smiled slyly. "Well, of course that might be a problem. However, if I BECAME strong in the power, you wouldn't have to worry about him taking me over at all."

He blinked. "Huh? How?"

Madoka's smile widened. "Silly, don't you remember how you gave me your Power in the first place?"

"Uh..."

"Besides... this has been a VERY stressful day. I hear that sex is a great stress relief, and I'm going to need a lot of it to get over today...."

"Uh..."

"Come on, Kyousuke... let's go to bed."

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